CAN WE BE FRIENDS?

Helping your special-needs kids build social skills is essential to their academic success. **By Catherine O'Neill Grace**

One warm afternoon, special education teacher Linda Cohn returned to her classroom after stepping out to copy a paper. "When I walked in, all the kids were giving me that mischievous look," she recalls. Cohn asked the class what was going on and they told her, "Jason was showing us his hip-hop steps."

"Better show me, too," she said nervously. Cohn knew that Jason was usually on the sidelines of classroom activity, and she feared the rest of the class was preparing to mock him.

Instead, three boys leapt to their feet and started to dance, to the delight of classmates and teacher alike. For Jason, a seventh grader with significant learning delays and communication challenges, participating in a fun activity with his peers was a major breakthrough.

Students with disabilities, whether they are developmental, cognitive, or physical, can find the "unwritten curriculum" of social life at school painfully isolating. Yet these children can be included, and experience the joy of connecting with peers—as Linda Cohn witnessed in her classroom. Here are some simple techniques you can use to foster positive social experiences for your special needs students.

A Place in the Circle

Research suggests that children with disabilities face more social isolation and challenges fitting in with other kids than their peers do. "Although children with disabilities are often mainstreamed and thus physically present in the classroom, they are usually not socially integrated," says Pamela J. Dixon, Ph.D., of the University of Michigan, who is currently conducting a three-year study about the social lives of children with disabilities.

"Social integration is really a cycle," Dixon says. "When children don't have social encounters, they don't learn how to interact with others, and then ultimately, others don't want to interact with them."

But teachers can help break that cycle at school. Richard LaVoie, author of *It's So Much Work to be Your Friend: Helping the Child With Learning Disabilities Find Social Success* (Touchstone, 2005), says the trick is to seek out what aren't always the most obvious solutions.

For instance, when a child is rejected by the other kids in class, "the teacher's first desire may be to compel the class to accept that child right away," says Lavoie. "But it's almost impossible to go directly from rejection to acceptance."

Instead, LaVoie advises, teachers should aim to teach the child a little bit about what not to do—for instance, don't barge in on games, don't interrupt,

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don't show off. Reducing behaviors that are perceived negatively should take the pressure off. It's okay for your student to fly under the radar for a time while you work with him on some exercises that develop social instincts and help him recognize social cues. Remember, he may not understand how his behavior is perceived by others and needs to be gently counseled about what is acceptable in social situations.

Lavoie, who taught disabled children for more than 30 years, uses a method he calls "social skills autopsy." When a child is rejected by other kids or has a negative social experience, start by asking the child to explain what happened. Next, ask the child to identify the mistake he made. If the child says he doesn't know what he did, it's probably true. Assist the child in determining the social error, but do it without judgement. If the child doesn't understand that he did something wrong, feeling punished will only make things worse.

Once the child is able to pinpoint the misstep, create a similar scenario and walk the child through it. What should he do this time instead? When he makes the right decision in the context of the hypothetical scenario, he's one step closer to doing the same in real life.

Practice Makes Perfect

Once your special needs kids have become accustomed to a social skills autopsy, they'll need practice. What made the difference for Linda Cohn's student, Jason? Cohn says the change happened once he established some social contacts with other kids through a structured after-school program.

"After Jason started going to the after-school activities, he had more in common with the other kids," Cohn says. "Before that, he was very resistant to accepting help and to making friends. He would stare at other kids, and he didn't get social cues. But the after-school program leveled the playing field."

Foster Understanding

Nondisabled students need to do their part as well. Making friends starts with a foundation of kindness and empathy, so it's important to work toward a more accepting classroom by making your rules clear. Lavoie advises teachers to take a stand: "In the lower grades you can say, 'This is my classroom and in my classroom I treat everyone with respect. I think everyone can be nice to each other. Once you walk into this room, you treat everyone with respect.'" Some teachers are afraid to pull rank like this. But remember, Lavoie adds, you're the tallest person in the room.

Often, rejection of learning disabled kids by the rest of the class comes from a lack of understanding. "Everyone Counts: Teaching Acceptance & Inclusion," a new K–6 program developed by the National Down Syndrome

Society (NDSS) aims to overcome this.

As part of the program, kids, working with the school's occupational and physical therapists, do exercises that show them what it would feel like to have a disability, including trying to write their name on the board while wearing socks on their hands, or walking across the room with their shoelaces tied together.

"There were 'a-ha!' moments for kids and adults alike during those exercises," says Laurie Agostino, the mother of a Down Syndrome child whose class is participating in the program at Tracey Elementary in Norwalk, Connecticut.

"The kids already accepted Joey for who he is," his mother says. "But after the program, they understood more about how and why he is different. They know that when people are different, it's okay to accept and to be a friend."

It's Worth the Effort

There's no doubt that tracking the social skills development of your special needs kids takes diligence. The progress can be as slow as academic growth sometimes is, except with added emotional stress. It's okay if you feel the tension, too. After all, no teacher wants to watch a child struggle with something as natural and necessary as human relationships. Building social bonds is essential to getting kids to enjoy coming to school. If kids feel ostracized by their peers, they'll find it harder to overcome their academic challenges. "There are some walls that need to be torn down," LaVoie says. "If a child feels threatened or unwanted, he is not going to be able to learn." Joey Agostino's mom knows this from experience."When my son interacts with his peers, he's just one of the guys," she says. "I know this will help him be okay." □

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Teacher Matchmaker

Help special needs kids build friendships by creating opportunities for them to interact with fellow students. Here are some suggestions:

- **HOLD CLASS MEETINGS** at which kids can express themselves and their perceptions. Develop a list of rules for these gatherings, including guidelines on how to express feelings without *hurting* feelings.
- **PLAN FREE-TIME ACTIVITIES,** at least some of the time. This will ensure that all kids are included in certain activities and might lead to more independent involvement.
- **TEACH SOCIAL SKILLS** to the entire class, including how to communicate clearly, resolve conflicts, and solve problems. Then it will be easier to counsel special needs students separately.
- **ESTABLISH CONNECTIONS** through peer or buddy programs. Regular interaction with the same group of kids can foster familiarity and combat discomfort.
- **INCLUDE SPECIAL NEEDS KIDS IN HELPING ROLES.** Feeling equal and included will stave off isolation.